

FROM THE DIARY OF A DEER HUNTER...

Bucks by the Book



THE AUTHOR
SHARES HIS
INNERMOST
MUSINGS
ABOUT
HUNTING
WHITETAILED...AND
A CERTAIN GREAT BUCK!

BY JOHN WOOTTERS

Dec. 6

*Conditions: Hot (90s);
moon just past full;
barometer steady,
cool front predicted
tomorrow.*

Some deer activity late today. Season has been open almost a month, but have not yet tried to hunt the buck. Am I afraid he'll be too good for me? He wouldn't be the first! Or maybe he's not even there; after all, I only caught a glimpse of him once, for a few seconds almost 11 months ago. More signs of pre-rut—increasing frequency of rubs (a few big ones) and some half-hearted scrapes—every day. Bucks should begin coming to horns any day now. Some already showing some “attitude.”

Decided it's time to put in a tripod stand on the Alamo buck's territory ...or what I presume to be his territory. He's hard to pattern, leaving little sign—I've often called big bucks “ghost-like” but this one really is. His hangout is tough to hunt, in the thickest brush. My selected stand location offers three narrow shooting lanes...if I see him at all it may be for only a few seconds. Not much time to spot, size him up and shoot, but it's my best hope.

Dec. 7, afternoon

Pearl Harbor Day

(maybe I could call in a sneak strike on the Alamo buck!) Conditions: Weather still warm, partly cloudy; big moon last night. Wind has shifted to the northwest and picked up, barometer dropping. The front's here, but so far it isn't much help.

Strange thoughts of sneak attacks pop into my mind as I lie in bed in the dark, waiting for the alarm clock, racking my brain for an idea that might help outsmart this buck. But when all is said and done, no gimmick is going to get him, only patience, sharp tactics and hard hunting. A little luck is always a handy thing to have around, but you can never depend on luck alone for a deer like this one. They usually have to be earned the old-fashioned way.

Decided to stay away for a few days...won't hunt the new tripod until I'm pretty sure the time is right. Meantime, I'll let the area settle down and let the new tripod become part of the landscape. It may be too close to his bedding area, but it's the only visibility in that thick stuff. Have to take the risk—and be very careful.

Didn't go out this morning. Hunted the new Valero-Pipeline blind this afternoon; arrived 1:30 p.m. Sighted

Texas border country is a whitetail paradise, and one haunted by die-hard hunters. The search for a particular buck however, can mean much more than the harvest.

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first buck at 3:10 p.m. but nothing else 'til 5:08, then five more by 6:01! The last two would make any hunter's heart happy. First came a near-mature mainframe 10-pointer with each G-2 deeply forked, making him an impressive 12. Antlers really heavy, rack well proportioned but not South-Texas wide—gross around 140 inches. He shows a fiery, dominant temperament. There was a time when I'd have walked barefoot on hot coals for a shot at a buck like this, but today—with the image of the Alamo buck hovering in my consciousness—I just enjoyed watching him. Next out of the brush was an even bigger-bodied 10-pointer, very high and wide with long eyeguards, but a little light and with trifling G-4s. One of those long-bodied deer that always weigh heavy, he has the gunfighter personality. No melodrama, no fireworks like the 12-pointer (who was suddenly very inconspicuous with the big 10 around), but he walks the walk and talks the talk with a quiet, menacing confidence. Boy, with two bucks like this in front of me on my first afternoon of hunting, I wonder if I'm foolish to hold out for what may be a real ghost of an Alamo buck!

Stayed in the blind 'til dark so as not to spook those two bucks off the stand; might have business with one of them later this season.

Dec. 8, afternoon

Hunted the Pistol Stand. Nothing until 5:00 p.m., then saw a pretty little 2½-year-old, toy eight-pointer. A small doe showed up later. Just at dusk, there was a certain amount of frisking, tail flirting and playing grab-ass, but it got too dark to see who won.

Dec. 9, morning

Conditions: Heavy clouds, temperature 55 degrees, but the wind is down.

Got to Conejo Flats late, 7:33 a.m.—still laying off the Alamo buck. Tried rattling for the first time, got two small bucks to come in. Walked and rattled a

while, but no takers. Still, the rut is obviously gathering momentum. Back at camp, a young eight-pointer was chasing a doe around the lake. Kept after her for more than an hour. He was having fun; she wasn't.

Dec. 9, afternoon

Conditions: Still very cloudy, with occasional light misting, but not so cool.

Hunted the Spooky Sendero, rattled once. Nice, big 135-class 10-pointer came in, following a doe. (It's always easier to rattle up bucks when a hot doe happens to run under the stand!) This buck is full-grown and very good. From the shape of his rack, he could be a son of my big '97 buck, which was shot in this same spot.

Total for this day: five bucks (one mature), nine does. If it's not raining, I may try for the Alamo buck tomorrow morning. The thought promises a restless night.

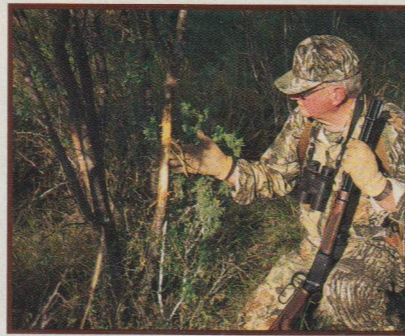
Dec. 10, morning

Conditions: Weather is unpleasant—cold, windy and heavy clouds, with mist and drizzle.

This was the first serious probe for the Alamo buck—"serious" meaning with loaded rifle in hand. As with all newly installed stands, arriving before daylight and trying to get in and set up without disturbing everything within 40 acres was nerve-racking, especially with the stakes so high. But all went fairly well; began seeing deer immediately. The morning produced sightings of 11 does and fawns and two bucks, neither of them the one. First was a yearling forkie-with-eyeguards, the other an ancient old warrior with senile antlers—heavy, short beams with nine spindly, short, irregular tines, reminiscent of a caribou bull's tops. I used the morning to get used to this new place, identifying all the brush and stump shapes that will look like deer in bad light, and noting where an animal will and won't be visible. The deer watched the stand constantly but showed little fear of it. So far, so good. Visibility better than expected.

Sitting there in the drizzle, it comes to me that deer hunting is not so much a

sport as a ritual. It's a tradition observed by hunters, like putting up the Christmas lights...something we just do at this season for reasons far beyond the obvious ones. It's a progression through a series of traditional "stations"—like getting up at 4:30 a.m. on cold mornings simply because that's when deer hunters get up and going out in the dark woods and sitting in a cold drizzle because that's what deer hunters do. We're out there, not so much in an effort or even the expectation of actually shooting something, but merely to play our self-assigned role and to be personally involved with the animals. We recharge our batteries from the exchange of



As the peak of the rut neared, the author redoubled his efforts to find fresh rubs made by the Alamo buck. He found a good one here, where the damage was obviously by a buck with very long fighting tines...the Alamo buck.

energies between hunter and hunted, a two-way communion. This is the paradox that makes hunting utterly incomprehensible to animals-rightists, the great secret that all real hunters share regardless of gender or age.

Satisfied (and cold) after 2½ hours, I slipped away when no animals were around to see me and thus associate a human presence with the stand.

Dec. 11, morning

Conditions: Rain, wind, temperature: 46 degrees.

Got up at 4:45 and checked weather. Closed the door, turned off the lights, and went back to bed. The Alamo buck is safe for another morning.

The weather is actually not all that bad for hunting, although one couldn't hunt comfortably. In my youth—50 years and 100 or more bucks ago—no kind of weather could have kept me in the house during deer season, and I shot

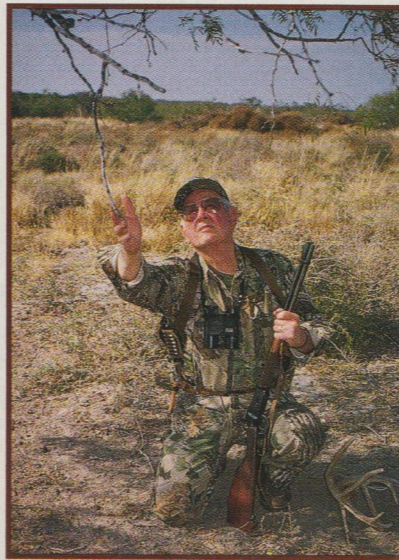
Bucks

some fine bucks in the rain. Nowadays, I'm not as bloodthirsty as I once was, or as I prefer to put it, I'm just not that mad at the deer any more. Getting old, maybe ("maybe," hell!). I guess I really don't care if I never shoot another whitetail, but I dearly love the process of hunting for a certain, specific big buck. The pleasure is in the hunting, and it'd be hard to take much pleasure from being out in the woods this morning!

Dec. 11, afternoon

Conditions: Occasional sun; temperature dropping; barometer high and steady; relative humidity falling like a rock; wind still howling.

At last, the weather is breaking. Hunted the west stand for about 1½ hours. Saw three bucks (2½-year-old eight-point, 3½-year eight-point, 4½-year 10-point) plus one doe and fawn. Bucks feeding together with little dominance byplay. One young buck rushing does but not following when they dodged away. The rutting peak is trembling on the brink, but it hasn't quite started yet. Maybe tomorrow.



Fresh scrapes help determine a dominant buck's home range during the rut. The author examined scores of scrapes and learned the habits and patterns of several bucks in the area.

Dec. 12, morning

Merwin and Billy departing this morning, so I didn't plan to hunt, but woke up at 4:30 a.m. out of habit. Opened one eye and saw three stars through the bedside window, the first for days. Thermometer read 38 F., lowest so far this season, but wind is still moaning under the eaves. No good for horn-rattling, but the rut could have kicked off overnight. All the drizzle yesterday only accumulated 0.1 inch in the rain gauge—just enough to make things miserable for die-hard hunters.

A pretty morning—except for the wind; maybe it'll quiet down this evening or tomorrow.

Dec. 12, afternoon

It didn't.

JUST IN CASE YOU WERE WONDERING...

Experience tells me that a few readers will resent—or will flatly disbelieve—this daily, personal report. They will convince themselves that I was hunting in some park with deer-proof fences, food plots, bait piles and automatic corn feeders.

Sorry, but it isn't so. This is a direct transcription from my handwritten notes (edited only for clarity and continuity) of a 1998 hunt that took place over 13 days on private property managed by myself. It is not high-fenced and has no feeders or bait piles and few permanent elevated blinds.

My friends and I logged 32 hunter-days and reported 228 bucks and 314 antlerless deer, averaging 24 deer (of which seven wore visible antlers) per hunter, per day, for an observed ratio of one buck for every 2.3 does. Many sightings were duplications, of course.

There's neither mystery nor magic to such a deer hunter's paradise. The land is superb whitetail habitat; the rest is management—or rather, absence of mismanagement. Careful records are kept and a harvest program designed to promote a high buck ratio and an older age structure among males carried out. There is no livestock competition, but no predator control and no supplemental nutrition, either. These are "natural" wild deer in natural habitat, and a joy to watch and to try to outwit!

Dec. 13, morning

Perfect morning, the best hunting morning of the year—freezing cold, dead calm, cloudless and six days before the new moon! Jeannie tried the new Valero blind and videoed 14 bucks in 2½ hours. I hurried to the Alamo tripod again, saw four bucks and four does, none of which was the Alamo buck. The old "caribou buck" I'd noted last time was still around, and this time he had a younger challenger, a husky, arrogant, mahogany-horned eight-pointer I think is 4½-years-old. When he saw the old buck, he immediately went to the nearest mesquite and thrashed and mouthed an overhanging twig, then scraped so vigorously that he raised a huge cloud of dust. When he'd urinated in the scrape, he threw up his head and glared savagely at the old buck—a classic challenge scrape. But the challenge was not accepted; the old buck watched the performance, and then turned and walked away with dignity. The drama unfolded within 40 yards of my stand, and I held my breath. The Alamo buck never materialized, but it didn't matter; I was thrilled to have had the peek into the whitetail rituals of the rut.

Dec. 14, morning

Conditions: Calm, cold, clear—the kind of morning that makes me want to walk and rattle, but today wasn't my day.

When jacking a round into my lever-action .307 WCF, I jammed the action, then let the magazine spring get away from me and lost it in the brush. Had another rifle in the car but lost the first (and best) rattling time. Nothing moved in the two spots I tried. Then picked up Jeannie at her Battleground blind (she captured seven bucks on videotape), and came to camp, only to find that illegal boarder crossers had entered the house while we were hunting and cleaned out my wallet and the pantry, and stole clothes and a pair of fine custom knives. In 20 years we've never locked up when we're on the property, and although we've suffered many break-ins and vandalism when we were away, this is the first time thieves have so brazenly entered the house when it was obvious

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that we were around. Especially when I'm here with Jeannie alone, this sort of thing sure takes the fun out of hunting, but it's a fact of life along the border these days. It won't get any better until Mexican politics change.

Dec. 15, morning

Conditions: Good morning for rattling—cool (39 degrees) and clear with a slight breeze.

Hunted the abandoned wellpad and had the first two all-out, full-commitment responses to horn rattling—a seven-pointer and a Pope and Young-class 10-pointer. The first came running straight downwind. Had three bucks up before I saw the first doe, and the final tally was five bucks, a doe and her fawn. Leon counted 12 bucks

and Jeannie eight; heck of a morning—but not a single shooter by local standards. Beginning to think I was wrong about the '98 antler crop, which I had figured to be better than average. So far, a below-average year. The split-G-2 12-pointer from the first afternoon hunt is still the best I've seen, but I'm not ready to toss in the towel yet.

Dec. 16, afternoon

Jeannie videoed a huge 12-point buck from the Pistol Stand! He came in after dusk, and only the low-light performance of her camcorder allowed us to see what he really has, which is plenty! He's a stunner. We named him the Retama Creek buck, and I'll bet he's the best we have this year. As usual, even in a mediocre year there will be a couple of superbucks around, and the Retama Creek buck is one of them. I find my hunter's brain already going to work on him, picturing the terrain around the Pistol Stand clearing, speculating on his strongholds and his possible routes, wondering how he might be hunted.

Dec. 17, morning

Conditions: Weather marginal.

Too much wind for rattling.

Temperature mild (high 40s),

but the wind makes it bite.

Slipped back in to the Alamo tripod, not really expecting too much...but this turned out to be the payoff morning! Had several does and fawns around, plus three small and medium bucks, none of them strangers. Then, without warning, I glanced to my left and saw none other than the Alamo buck himself walking down the old *sendero* toward me!

He moved like a heavyweight fighter, with a lightness and balance that belied his weight and power, the very picture of a fully-mature whitetail buck. His body was so deep it made his legs look too short, and his neck so swollen that his head and ears seemed too short. He showed the loose skin under his jaw and the little potbelly of age, but still he took my breath away, making the other bucks in view look like schoolboys.



Through diligent note taking—including information on rut activity, weather conditions and deer sightings—the author was able to put the hunting odds in his favor.

There was not the slightest doubt that this was the same animal I'd seen late last season. The sheer mass and power of him set him apart, but his rack showed exactly the same configuration that had burned itself into my memory last January, the 10 points, squarish shape, strikingly long G-3s, and low, sweeping main beams. Binocular glued to my eyes at less than 60 yards, I went over every detail.

It was the same buck...but the intervening year has cost him dearly. His rack was a perfect, but smaller, replica of the mighty antlers that made me gasp last year. Easily a 150-class rack, if I hadn't seen him at his peak, I might have shot him instantly. But last year was the finest season for growing antlers in history, and 1998 has been only mediocre. That, and

the weight of another winter upon his brow left him—though still impressive—a lesser trophy in spread, mass, and length of tines and beams.

I held my breath and studied him...and the conviction grew upon me that I couldn't shoot the Alamo buck now, not because he was not a worthy trophy, but because he was no longer the target buck I've dreamed and schemed about for a whole year. Besides, I had already accomplished everything I set out to do except actually pulling the trigger. I'd scouted him, figured out and penetrated his stronghold, timed him and hunted him successfully. Now, I rested the cross hair where his massive neck joined his shoulders and whispered, "Bang! Gotcha, you smart old bastard!"

I watched him turn and fade like ancient gray smoke into the thornbrush as he had done so often in his long life. I sat there in the tripod for a few minutes, smiling and proud and strangely contented, then got down and started the long walk back to the truck, my season complete. [?]